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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SKOPJE 001078

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: SOCIAL DEMOCRATS ELECT NEW PARTY
PRESIDENT

REF: SKOPJE 980

SUMMARY

11. (C) During a November 5 party congress that lasted into the early hours of the following day, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) delegates elected by a landslide former Deputy Prime Minister Radmila Sekerinska as the new party president. The delegates chose as the party's secretary general a close associate of President Crvenkovski, himself a former head of the SDSM. The SDSM central board later tapped a member Crvenkovski's staff as one of the SDSM's three vice presidents. The leadership change demonstrates Crvenkovski's continued influence in the SDSM, and the fall from grace of his former creation then rival, ex-Prime Minister Vlado Buckovski. As Sekerinska consolidates her leadership position she can be expected to work to distance herself from Crvenkovski, whose past influence in the SDSM has been blamed by some Social Democrat insiders for the party's failure to undergo needed reforms. That could bode well, initially, for the government's relations with SDSM. End Summary.

SOLE CANDIDATE

12. (SBU) The SDSM, the largest opposition party in Macedonia, elected former Deputy Prime Minister Radmila Sekerinska as the new party president during a November 5 party congress that lasted into the early hours of the following day. SDSM held the extraordinary congress nearly a month after the former party president and ex-Prime Minister, Vlado Buckovski, lost a vote of confidence at the Social Democrats' October 7 convention (reftel). Sekerinska, who long had been considered the heir apparent and who enjoyed the strong support of President Crvenkovski (himself a former SDSM president), won easily, receiving 456 votes of the 516 ballots cast. The SDSM congress was largely uneventful, as Sekerinska was the sole candidate for the president's seat and the bulk of intra-party debates had been aired and resolved during the October convention. Sekerinska is the first woman to hold the office of SDSM president.

CRVENKOVSKI'S CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

13. (SBU) In addition to a new SDSM president, the party elected a new secretary general and 70 members to the SDSM central board. The new secretary general, Goran Mincev, is a relative unknown who previously served in an obscure government position and who is widely considered to be

"Crvenkovski's man." Mincev ran against Ljubco Jordanovski, who until recently served as Macedonia's Ambassador to the U.S. and is a former president of the parliament. The election of Mincev over Jordanovski, who is close to Buckovski, signals a complete break from Buckovski's SDSM and a further strengthening of the ties between the new SDSM leadership and President Crvenkovski.

14. (SBU) The newly elected SDSM central board held its first meeting on November 7 and elected three new party vice presidents and the 15 members of the party presidency. The new vice presidents include Jani Makraduli, a former SDSM party whip in the parliament who is closely aligned with Sekerinska (he was her witness at her recent marriage); Igor Ivanovski, an MP and close confidante of Crvenkovski; and Zoran Zaev, the mayor of the southeast Macedonian city of Strumica and the only member of the new leadership linked to Buckovski.

THE FUTURE OF SDSM -- ESCAPING CRVENKOVSKI'S SHADOW

15. (C) The change in party leadership not only reflects the delegates' general dissatisfaction with what they considered to have been the failed policies and poor poll ratings of former SDSM president Buckovski, but also signals Crvenkovski's attempt to tighten the party reins. Although Sekerinska's rise to power in the party owes much to Crvenkovski's support, that does not necessarily mean she will repay the favor with blind loyalty to him and his circle. Sekerinska is likely to work to escape Crvenkovski's shadow in order to strengthen her own control over the rank and file and implement the party reforms she has advocated. She will have to proceed with caution, however, to avoid

SKOPJE 00001078 002 OF 002

provoking counter-reactions from Crvenkovski loyalists such as Mincev and Ivanovski.

RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT -- AN UNORTHODOX ALLY?

16. (C) Sekerinska can probably count on initial cooperation from the government if she chooses to work toward legislative victories to consolidate her position. PM Gruevski was among the first of Macedonia's political leaders to congratulate Sekerinska after her victory and he met with her midweek to discuss how to work constructively together and how to conduct a more civilized public debate over policy differences. Gruevski likely would jump at the chance to widen any gap between Sekerinska and Crvenkovski, given his long-standing disdain for the President and refusal to recognize Crvenkovski's election as legitimate. Sekerinska may therefore find a more flexible, compromise-ready government ally will give her the leverage she needs to increase the distance between her and Crvenkovski.

BUCKOVSKI'S FALL FROM GRACE AND A POSSIBLE OLIVE BRANCH

17. (C) The political rift between Buckovski and Crvenkovski grew to an open feud over the past year as the latter sought to undermine the ex-Prime Minister in order to strengthen his own position in the party (reftel). With Buckovski no longer a member of the party's key decision-making bodies, it is possible that, once the SDSM constitution is modified to permit formal faction, he will form an internal party faction to contest Crvenkovski's influence. It is unlikely, however, that he will risk leaving SDSM in the short-term, since he is not sure how many party supporters would jump ship with him. In statements to the press, he has made it clear that for now he intends to work within SDSM for reforms that would loosen the party's current rigid, centralized structure. Additionally, the election of Buckovski's party ally Zaev as an SDSM vice president could be an olive branch to the former Prime Minister's supporters and could provide an opening for a Buckovski-Sekerinska entente to counter Crvenkovski.

MILOVANOVIC